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Publishers' Department

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The Political Situation in France.

FOR the last three months, apart from the clerical question, which for the French working class has now become a secondary matter, the struggle for the weekly rest day voted for by parliament and constantly violated, especially by the small employers, has been the great question of the day in the proletarian and socialist life of France. This situation is very instructive for the sociologist, and especially for the socialist steeped in the Marxian conception, which alone furnishes him a means for understanding the facts and the attitude of the different political parties. But, first I wish to sketch briefly for the American reader the recent political evolution of France.

It will be remembered that in the last parliamentary election, May 1906, a heavy majority was obtained by the radical party, which corresponds closely enough to your democratic party, at least the Bryan wing.

Already in the two preceding parliaments, from 1899 to 1902 and 1902 to 1906, the radicals had had a majority. But this majority was precarious, since to govern in parliament the radical ministers had to depend on the help of the section of former opportunists which had left the opportunist party (that party corresponds pretty closely to your republican party) at the time of the Dreyfus affair, to stand with the radicals and socialists in defense of democratic institutions. These were threatened by the Nationalists, the Clericalists and the Monarchists, who counted on the support of the mass of the opportunist party, apart from those dissenting opportunists who followed Waldeck-Rousseau, who had been up to that time the representative par excellence of "Capitalist Republicanism".

It was under these conditions that Waldeck-Rousseau formed a cabinet with the radicals and that in 1902 he was replaced by Combes, who accenuated this policy in the direction of anti-clericalism. At the same time a considerable group of Socialist deputies, entangled in the policy of collaboration with the "advanced" parties of the bourgeoisie, sustained these ministries in a consistent fashion by their votes. Nevertheless these radical majorities from 1899 to 1906 were not homogeneous since they comprised on the Right the Waldeckists or former Opportunists, called "Group of the Democratic Union", which often threatened to abandon the Government as too advanced and on the Left the Socialists who, in spite of their policy of

combination, at some times made occasional demands which were considered *too revolutionary*.

This situation was still further complicated by the successful formation of the socialist "Unity" after the Amsterdam Congress, which was finally brought about in April, 1905. The majority of the fusing socialists, including Jaures, de Pressense, and Rouanet then united with the uncompromising socialists like Guesde and Vaillant to form a single class party which inevitably took, in the Chamber, an attitude of resolute independence toward the bourgeois parties and leaders. The few self-styled socialists of the Jaures group who refused to join the "Unity" were mainly composed of ambitious politicians desirous of entering into a ministry, a thing which the "Unity" did not permit. This was notably the case with Briand and Viviani, who at the present moment are both in the Clemenceau cabinet, one as Minister of Public Instruction; the other as Minister of Labor, a post created for Viviani, but the little group called "Independent Socialists" did not suffice (there were only about fifteen of them) to replace in the governmental majority all the deputies of the socialist "Unity". It was in this way that the Combes ministry fell and a ministry representing rather the interests of finance and greater capitalism, the ministry half Waldeckist, half Rouvier radical, was formed in April, 1905. Soon, however, it fell and on the eve of the election, in March 1906, the radicals gained the upper hand. It was replaced by the Sarrien-Clemenceau ministry. Sarrien represented moderate radicalism; Clemenceau the more-advanced radicalism. Sarrien being a man of no great force of character was rapidly eliminated by Clemenceau, especially after the elections of May, 1906.

These elections resulted in a startling victory for all the parties of the Left. The organized socialists, whom the capitalist parties ironically gave the name "The Unified", obtained 52 seats as against 37 in the preceding parliament. The "Independent Socialists" increased their representation from 16 to 20 and the radicals, who had held 230 seats, raised their number to more than 320. The reactionary parties, opportunists, nationalists and monarchists were crushed, in spite of their attempt to profit by the law of the Separation of Church and State. This law had been voted in 1905 under the ministries of Combes and Rouvier as a sequel to the aggressions of the papacy, and, thanks to the socialists, it was enacted in a spirit of broad tolerance,*

*) The French radicals, who are thorough Jacobins, having the old tradition of the ideological struggle against Catholicism, wished to enact a much more rigorous law. On several occasions the socialists, with Jaures, voted with the opportunists for certain more tolerant articles of the law. In spite of this the French socialists are accused, in America, of persecuting the Church.

so that no voters took very seriously the lamentations over their persecutions of which the clericals pretended to be victims.

But the radicals, in spite of their victories, had their souls poisoned by the success, relatively greater than theirs, of the terrible "Unified" who refused to take part in the pretty little arrangement for co-operative housekeeping and had the presumption to remain a class party, absolutely independent. And so it was that their great orator and minister, Clemenceau, delivered himself on his return to parliament in June 1906, of a violent attack against the socialist doctrine in response to Jaures, a part of whose speech is already familiar to the readers of this Review.* Clemenceau showed that while thoroughly imbued with the philosophy of the eighteenth century, the encyclopedists and the philosophy of the eighteenth century, the encyclopedists and the immune to the conceptions of modern socialism as defined by Marx and Engels, and as they emerge at once from the philosophy of modern development and from the daily experience of the organized working class on both sides the Atlantic.

Nevertheless the radical party and its leaders fully realized that after their imposing victory at the polls it was incumbent on them to give the proletarian masses in city and country something more than the sarcasms of the Ministry of the Interior upon the bad working—hypothetical, of course—of the future collectivist system or than complaints about the "iron discipline" wickedly imposed by the socialist party upon its members. In a stirring speech, after the ministers had announced their reform program, Jaures had hurled at them this startling accusation, "You do not stand on Universal Suffrage." ("Vous etes au dessous du Suffrage Universel").

It was for the radicals to prove, on the contrary, that they were in close touch with the wishes of the country and that they knew how to realize them. The difficulty was great for this party of the little bourgeoisie which for thirty-five years had always been able to satisfy its constituency by "hitting the priest" and systematically ignoring economic problems, claiming like the petit bourgeois democratic parties of all countries to "rise above class lines".

Two reforms had been practically demanded by the French proletariat notably at the time of the recent May Day demonstrations. These were the eight hour day and a law establishing the weekly rest day for all municipalities. The establishment of the legal work day of eight hours, or even ten hours as is vaguely promised by a draft for a law in the distant future, clashed with too many capitalist interests. On the other hand,

*) See International Socialist Review for September, 1906.

the government thought that the establishment of a weekly rest day for all laborers would meet with the unanimous support of all parties and, in fact the Chamber, fresh from its promises to the good people, voted enthusiastically and almost unanimously the first draft of the law. Who could protest against so humane a measure! Was it endurable that the very "future of the French race" should be threatened longer by the debilitating labor imposed upon the workmen in certain crafts such as bakers or cooks who often had not a single rest day a month.

The current was so strong that even in the senate where, as with you, all labor laws passed by the lower house generally go to pieces, the vote for the reform was not delayed more than a few months; it was finally enacted at the end of last October.

But then from all sides came violent protests from the capitalists. The great employers, however, almost everywhere yielded before the pressure of organized labor. On the other hand, the whole class of small employers and small merchants, who, sad to say, are the very class represented by the radicals, began to protest violently against the "ill-considered" law for they dared not attack the principle of the law itself. They merely wished to be allowed such exceptions and combinations that any control on the part of the labor inspectors should become impossible.

Pulled one way by the class whose psychology they especially represented and the other way by the proletariat, firmly resolved not to lose the benefit of the reform, the government and radical majority are greatly embarrassed. In spite of the demands of the small employers and merchants they have not dared to nullify or modify the law by legislative action. On the other hand, in practice the ministry and especially the Minister of Labor (the self-styled "socialist" Viviani) has felt itself called to close its eyes often upon the violation of the new law. Along this line there have been published in the socialist press and especially in the *Humanite'*, circulars of the Minister of Labor to the factory inspectors counseling them to apply only with moderation and reserve the legal penalties which had been incurred.

The same radical government headed its platform with the nationalization of railroads and to begin with that of the Western Line, (Normandy and Brittany). This has been voted by the Chamber but the great capitalist interests are fighting it bitterly and there is every reason to fear that finally the senate will reject the reform. The government does not seem in any way resolved to act energetically to break down this resistance of our "House of Lords".

Likewise again the law for workingmen's pensions, voted by the preceding Chamber before the election, is chronically be-

fore the senate, which refuses, on account of insufficient financial resources, to give the old laborers the crumb of bread which the republican government has promised them for so long. The government, however, does not act. I might add again that had it not been for the ardent and incessant campaign of the socialists, the same government would have permitted the Russian government to float its abominable loan with the support of the Christian or Jewish financiers of France to afford means for slaughtering the Jewish or Christian proletarians of Russia. At the moment of writing it is not yet known whether Rouvier, the former Prime Minister, now at the head of a syndicate of the great banks of Paris, will yet have succeeded through the weakness of the government in carrying through this loan "under private uniform".

In spite of all this the working class is organizing itself and its strength is growing everywhere. The socialist party, which in its several sections, then antagonistic, numbered in 1894 at the time of the Amsterdam Congress scarcely 20,000 members, has at the present moment more than 60,000.

The relations between the political organization of the working class and the federation to which our trade unionists belong were until lately about as bad as possible on account of the socialist dissensions which had been echoing for twenty years in labor circles. To-day we are coming closer and closer to a complete and lasting understanding between the federation and the socialist party. This will make the condition of the proletariat so much the more healthful, and will give new efficiency to its combined efforts.

JEAN LONGUET,

Translated by Charles H. Kerr.